

## 1. Foot's Thesis

Foot is challenging Kant's claim that we must do what is moral whether we want to or not. Her thesis is that there is no intelligible sense of 'must' that would make Kant's claim a correct one.

## 2. Redefining 'Imperative'

Foot claims that when Kant talks of imperatives he is not just talking about commands like, "Eat your peas," or "Lie so as to make money." He is also speaking about normative and evaluative statements: In Foot's words, "... statements to the effect that something ought to be done or that it would be good to do it."

So we're concerned with the following statements:

- (1) You shouldn't lie.
- (2) You should pay your taxes.
- (3) You should clean your gun if you want it to shoot well.
- (4) Lying is bad.
- (5) Paying your taxes is good.
- (6) If you want your gun to shoot straight, it is a good idea to clean it.

## 3. Hypothetical imperatives:

"Without committing ourselves to this view it will be useful to follow Kant in classing together as 'hypothetical imperatives' those telling a man what he ought to do because (or if) he wants something and those telling him what he ought to do on grounds of self-interest" (p. 306).

## 4. The Initial Question

Foot points out that hypothetical imperatives are as diverse as our wants (or desires). (You should warm the jug if you want hot coffee; you should stay in school if you want to make something of yourself.)

**Foot's question: "Is Kant right to say that moral judgments are categorical, not hypothetical, imperatives?"**

Foot's First Answer: Yes

### Two uses of 'should'.

According to the **hypothetical use of 'should'**, the speaker of 'X should Y,' must (should?) withdraw this claim if she is informed that X does not want to Y and X does not want anything he can get by Y-ing.

According to the **categorical use of 'should'**, the speaker of 'X should Y,' need not withdraw this claim, even if she is informed that X does not want to Y and X does not want anything he can get by Y-ing

When we use 'should' to make moral claims our statements are categorical in this sense. "When we say a man should do something and intend a moral judgment we do not have to back up what we say by considerations about his interests and desires; if no such connection can be found the 'should' need not be withdrawn" (p. 307).

## 5. Rules of Etiquette

But, Foot claims, Kant meant more than this when he claimed the existence of a categorical imperative. And he would have to mean something more if his claim is to have any real force. Why? Because rules to which we attach little importance are categorical in this sense: i.e. the rules of etiquette

(\*) You should not wear white after Labor Day.

Suppose you tell X that he should not wear white after Labor Day. X says, "I don't care about etiquette. What's it to you that I'm wearing white?" Still, Foot says you "need not" withdraw your claim that X should not wear white after Labor Day.

Question: What does it mean to say that you must or you mustn't withdraw your statement of etiquette? Foot doesn't want to say that it is still **true** that you should not wear white after Labor Day, does she?

Kant would say that rules of etiquette are only hypothetical imperatives, but then Kant cannot say that a 'should'-statement is a categorical imperative just in case our use of it is categorical in the sense defined above. If rules of morality are distinct from rules of etiquette it must be because being categorical amounts to something more than this.

## 6. The Positive Proposal

"Very roughly the idea seems to be that one may reasonably ask why anyone should bother about what should<sub>e</sub> [should from the point of etiquette] be done, and that such considerations deserve no notice unless reason is shown. So although people give as their reason for doing something the fact that it is required by etiquette, we do not take this consideration as *in itself giving us a reason to act*. Considerations of etiquette do not have any automatic reason-giving force, and a man might be right if he denied that he had reason to do "what's done" . . . by contrast it is supposed that *moral considerations necessarily give reasons for acting to any man*" (p. 309).

So that's what Kant meant when he said that the moral imperative is categorical: If you have a moral obligation to do something – if you should<sub>m</sub> do that thing – then you have a **reason** to do that thing regardless of what you want.

The question then is this: **Do we have a reason to be moral even when we do not want to do what we are morally required to do?**

## 7. Foot's Skepticism

Foot claims that being immoral is not being irrational in any obvious sense: Being immoral does not mean being inconsistent. It does not necessarily make one unhappy. Immorality needn't arise from passion or ignorance; it needn't cause (or even warrant) regret. Immorality needn't be self-defeating.

If we think that we must follow moral rules whereas we need not follow rules of etiquette this might just be because of our **moral training**:

"People talk, for instance, about the "binding force" of morality, but it is not clear what this means if not that we **feel** ourselves unable to escape. . . Both [morality and etiquette] are inescapable in that behavior does not cease to offend against them because the agent is indifferent to their purposes and to the disapproval he will incur by flouting them. But morality is supposed to be inescapable in some special way and this may turn out to be merely a reflection of the way morality is taught" (p. 105).

## 8. Physical Compulsion

“A man has to go if he is pulled by strong men, and he must give in if he is tortured beyond his endurance.”

Question: Is the moral ‘must’ similarly the ‘must’ of physical compulsion?

Foot’s Answer: No. Moral claims only have validity when physical compulsion is absent. ‘Ought’ implies ‘could have done otherwise’.

## 9. The Possibility of Altruism

(a) The Hobbesean account of desire: People are only capable of desiring what is in their own self-interest.

**Strong:** The content of a person’s desires is always *limited* to that person’s own self-interest. (E.g. I cannot want to help you.)

**Weak:** The content of a person’s desires always *includes* that person’s own self-interest. (E.g. I can want to help you, but only if that desire is part of a conjunctive desire: e.g., when I want to help you **and** bring myself pleasure, and this conjunctive desire – along with my belief that I can help you and bring myself pleasure by X-ing – can motivate me to X.)

(b) Foot’s claim: Kantians assumed a Hobbesean account of desire. It is only if one thinks that a person’s desires are *limited* to their own well-being (i.e. that people are always **selfish**) that one must turn to something other than desire to explain how we can act in accordance with altruistic morality. *But* if people can simply *desire the good of other people*, then there can be *altruistic actions without categorical imperatives*.

A moral hypothetical imperative might say: “Don’t lie if you want to be good.” And if a person acts on this imperative, if she refrains from lying *because she wants to be good*, we can say that she has acted altruistically and deserves moral praise for doing so. We needn’t say that altruistic actions arise from duty alone (i.e. respect for the moral law: a.k.a. the categorical imperative); we can instead describe altruistic action as the product of **altruistic desire**.

Again, Foot claims, it was only because Kant thought that all desires were selfish or “self-interested” that he thought we needed to turn to something other than desire to find an altruistic motivation. But Kant was wrong. We are capable of desiring the good of other people. When we act from such unselfish desires, we act altruistically

## 10. Foot’s Conclusion

“...moral judgments have no better claim to be categorical imperatives than do statements about matters of etiquette. People may indeed follow either morality or etiquette without asking why they should do so, but equally well they may not. They may ask for reasons and may reasonably refuse to follow either if reasons are not to be found.”

Question: Suppose someone is contemplating killing another human being for sport. You tell him he should not do this; that it would be immoral to do this. He asks you why he should do what morality tells him to do; he asks for **reasons** for doing what morality tells him to do. Foot says that he is entirely reasonable in asking for these reasons. Suppose you reply by informing him of the pain he will inflict on his victim, and the suffering the victim’s family will have to incur. You tell him the victim has a promising career in medicine and he will never achieve his goals if he is killed. That is, you give the man contemplating murder what look to be **moral reasons** for sparing an innocent life. If the man cannot respond with reasons which (in some intuitive sense) *outweigh* these reasons, wouldn’t he be unreasonable to carry out the murder?

**The amoralist:** "He will agree that a moral man has moral ends and cannot be indifferent to matters such as suffering and injustice. Further, he will recognize in the statement that one ought to care about these things a correct application of the non-hypothetical moral "ought" by which society is apt to voice its demands. He will not, however, take the fact that he ought<sub>m</sub> to have certain ends as in itself reason to adopt them. If he himself is a moral man then he cares about such things, but not "because he ought." If he is an amoral man he may deny that he has any reason to trouble his head over this or any other moral demand. Of course he may be mistaken, and his life as well as others' lives may be most sadly spoiled by his selfishness. But this is not what is urged by those who think they can close the matter by an emphatic use of 'ought'. My argument is that they are relying on an illusion, as if trying to give the moral 'ought' a magic force" (p. 315).

What are reasons? What is it to have a reason to do something?

### Internal vs. External Reasons

X is an *external reason* for S to perform action A if and only if X represents A as valuable.

X is an *internal reason* for S to perform action A if and only if X represents A as conducive to the satisfaction of S's interests, desires or inclinations.

An Example: Suppose S doesn't care whether he lives or dies. Still, if his life is valuable, then the fact that he needs to eat to continue to live provides him with an **external reason** to eat. The fact that eating is necessary for life represents eating as valuable given that life is in fact valuable. But S does not have an **internal reason** to eat if he does not want to live, because the fact that eating is necessary for life does not represent eating as a means to satisfying S's desires given that S does not want to live.

Question: Consider the claim that morality is categorical in the sense that we have reason to follow it irrespective of our desires. To show that morality is categorical in this sense do we need to show that we always have **internal reasons** to be moral? Or is it enough to show that we have **external reasons** to be moral?

It seems that Kant was only trying to show that we have external reasons to be moral. Of course, if we always have external reasons to be moral, there must be things which have value, and there must be things which have value no matter what we desire. (If things only had value in relation to our desires, then we would only have external reasons to do things when we had internal reasons to do those things.) But Kant clearly thought this was so: humanity has value even in a world where it is despised. So Kant would say that our inability to show that murder is not always against the self-interest of the murderer does not show that it is not irrational (or unreasonable) for the murderer to murder. If there are compelling external reasons for the murderer not to murder, and there are no overriding external reasons for him to commit this act, then it seems it would be irrational (in some sense) for the murderer to kill his victim. The murderer would fail to do what he has most reason to do.

Question: Is this a satisfying vindication of the irrationality (or unreasonableness) of someone's knowingly acting in an immoral way? If not, what more needs to be added? Do we need to show that it is always *imprudent* to knowingly act (or be the kind of person who knowingly acts) in an immoral way?